



CARAVAN CLUB ECOLOGICAL SITE
APPRAISAL



NORMANHURST COURT CARAVAN CLUB SITE
STEVENS CROUCH
BATTLE
EAST SUSSEX
TN33 9LR



General information

Site name and county: Normanhurst Court, East Sussex
Grid reference: TQ711148
Area: c7ha
Date: 22/07/2002
Recorder: J. Turner, Consultant Ecologist, JUST ECOLOGY
Weather conditions: Bright sunshine, light breeze

Site description: The site is situated in the grounds of Normanhurst Court, demolished in the 1950's. Exotic specimen trees and a terrace wall and steps remain from this period. A strip of woodland separates the site from the A271 to the north-west and from a minor road forming the south-western boundary. Part of the road verge near the entrance to site is a designated wildlife verge. More substantial blocks of woodland border the southern and eastern boundaries.

The site itself consists principally of short mown grass and hard-standing areas for pitches set in a matrix of similar grassland with frequent small blocks of native and exotic trees and more extensive areas of woodland (in places dominated by *Rhododendron ponticum*) to the edges. Internal roads serving the pitches are surfaced with tarmac and cover a considerable area of the site.

Context: Normanhurst Court is set within a well wooded, gently rolling landscape. Large blocks of woodland, probably of some antiquity are a feature of the landscape, much of which appears to be chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) coppice. The site itself is discreetly placed within this context.



Habitat information

Broad habitats present: Semi/unimproved grassland; native deciduous woodland; scrub; tall herb; amenity grassland.

BAP priority habitats present: Lowland dry acid grassland (<0.5ha) potential lowland hay meadow (<0.5ha).

Subsidiary habitats present: Dead wood, principally in the form of large old tree stumps set in close mown/rabbit grazed grassland; old walls.

Plant communities present: Grassland communities range from species-poor short MG6 (*Lolium perenne* – *Cynosurus cristatus* grassland) to U1 acid grassland and degraded MG5 (*Cynosurus cristatus* – *Centaurea nigra* grassland). Vascular plant species indicative of good quality acid grassland include frequently occurring sheep's sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*), slender St John's wort (*Hypericum pulchrum*) common centaury (*Centaureum erythraea*), bird's-foot trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) and more rarely, common bird's-foot (*Ornithopus perpusillus*) and heath speedwell (*Veronica officinalis*), in a sward principally composed of common bent grass (*Agrostis stolonifera*). Heath bedstraw (*Galium saxatile*) is also found sparingly along the entrance drive. Acid grassland habitat is patchily distributed throughout the site occupying less than 0.5 ha in total.

Neutral grassland is also present on a closely mown bank below the old terrace where frequently occurring black knapweed (*Centaurea nigra*), common sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*) and field woodrush (*Luzula campestris*) represent the community (MG5) in an unfavourably short sward. This community is only situated on a steeply sloping bank south-east of the terrace steps.

Woodland on the site is probably highly modified W10 and W16 oak woodland. Planting and invasion of *Rhododendron ponticum* has significantly lowered the interest of the woodland which also includes some sycamore. Woodland edge habitat by roadsides, pitches, and small groups of native birches (*Betula pendula*), oak (*Quercus* spp) and aspen (*Populus tremula*) do support a more diverse ground flora, which includes occasional scaly male fern (*Dryopteris affinis*), soft shield fern (*Polystichum setiferum*) and some ancient woodland flowers such as frequent yellow pimpernel (*Lysimachia nemorum*) and more rarely, figwort (*Scrophularia nodosa*). These groups of trees are also valuable for supporting common lichen and bryophyte epiphyte communities. Nearby woodland outside the boundaries and the road verge on the western boundary gives some idea of other species which might be present in the original woodland and includes hard fern (*Blechnum spicant*) and numerous native acid woodland bryophytes.

A small patch of W8 (*Fraxinus excelsior* - *Acer campestre* - *Mercurialis perennis*) woodland is present at the south-eastern boundary with typical ground flora of dog's mercury (*Mercurialis perennis*), bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*), enchanter's nightshade (*Circaea lutetiana*) and primrose (*Primula vulgaris*). The invasive alien Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*) has also established here.

Hedgerow quality: Short screening hedgerows are a feature of the site but are generally of little value for wildlife other than as shelter and potential feeding areas for common garden birds.

Significance of trees: A good number of exotic conifers were planted during the mid 19th century and these have matured into impressive sized specimens, some of which contain useful micro-habitats such as rot-holes. They provide useful breeding grounds for a variety of invertebrates and probable shelter for birds and possibly bats. Apart from occasional beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) native trees don't appear to have been much planted and there are none of significant age or structure within the site.

Wetland quality: No water bodies are present

Other important habitat features: The old terrace wall provides a niche for an interesting calcicolous bryophyte community and probably for lichens too. Low scrub, tall herb and less intensively mown grassland also occur immediately below the wall.



Habitat evaluation

The site is principally important for the acid and neutral grassland communities present. These are not of the highest quality but qualify as BAP habitats and have the potential for improvement with subtle changes in management.

Most woodland at the site has been much degraded by Rhododendron and is of value principally for cover and possibly for invertebrates associated with shaded litter. The large quantity of dead wood at the site is a valuable asset, but there are probably too few nectar sources nearby for species such as longhorn beetles that breed in dead wood, to maximise its potential. Woodland edge habitat does support some interesting plants, but on the whole the transitions between woodland and grassland are very abrupt, and this habitat is of limited value.

As the site is set in a rich, well-wooded landscape, it probably suffers in comparison with neighbouring sites, especially woodland, as more mobile species are more likely to utilise more natural, less degraded, habitat nearby. However, this also means that the site has a valuable role to play in linking these richer sites.



Species information

Flora: No one species found is particularly rare but, as an assemblage, there is a good variety. Most of the more interesting species found, indicative either of unimproved grasslands or old woodland, are noted above under plant communities above.

Avifauna: Apart from a single song thrush, only common garden birds, including blue tit and blackbird were noted.

Invertebrates: Surprisingly few invertebrates were noted, despite the warm weather. Butterflies were noticeably scarce, despite searching *Buddleia* bushes as were other nectar-seeking insects. Some hoverflies were noted along the woody boundaries, and two individuals of the common longhorn beetle *Strangalia maculata* were noted on large stumps. Litter under trees revealed several species of ground beetle, woodlice, arachnids and snails in good numbers.

Herpetofauna: None noted, although slow worms are likely and common lizard could possibly utilise parts of the site.

Mammals: Apart from numerous rabbits, and occasional grey squirrels, no mammal activity was detected, although the site is likely to provide a home for small rodents and insectivores and foxes. The site could be used by bats for feeding although no potential roosts were noted.

Other species groups: The site supports a good diversity of bryophytes (60+ spp), from typical acid woodland species (e.g. *Leucobryum glaucum* and *Isothecium myosuroides*) to those more commonly associated with chalky grassland (e.g. *Anomodon viticulosus* and *Rhynchostegiella tenella*). The latter were found on the old terrace wall where they are obviously influenced by lime-rich mortar.

The majority of bryophytes recorded are relatively common, both nationally and locally, but several are restricted to nutrient poor environments and may be declining. This wall also supported a range of lichens. No fungi of note were seen, mainly due to the season, but it is possible that a range of interesting grassland species could be found, including waxcaps and other fungi of unimproved grassland.

BAP species seen: A single song thrush noted near the entrance to the site.

BAP species potential: Only birds likely and possibly invertebrates, including stag beetle (*Lucanus cervus*), although more detailed survey would be required to establish this.

Other notable species: None noted.

Species evaluation

Species diversity at Normanhurst Court is surprisingly good considering the limited available habitat. Vascular plant species range from indicators of native ancient woodland on base-rich soils to dry acid grassland. Similarly bryophytes and lichens ranged from epiphytes of acidic bark to species normally associated with chalk grassland growing on a wall. Invertebrate diversity, especially of detritivores and other litter dwellers may well be similarly good. What was noticeable however was the poor showing of more visible groups such as butterflies, hoverflies and flower beetles. Birds were similarly scarce. It is possible that a lack of edge habitat and nectar sources accounts for the scarcity of these invertebrates and proximity of less disturbed habitat nearby for the birds.

Management recommendations

Threats to wildlife:	Potential management solutions:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grassland quality may decline under mowing regime, especially as arisings are left in situ. • Expansion of Rhododendron will continue to devalue woodland habitat. • Japanese knotweed (a notifiable weed) is present in woodland on the site. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New mowing regimes could be devised for selected areas of grassland with arisings removed from some grassland areas • Clearances of some Rhododendron in woodland, taking care to avoid areas where this action could damage the more uncommon bryophytes. • Less frequent mowing of some areas bordering woodland edge and cutting back some trees to provide a more gradual transition, especially in Rhododendron dominated areas. • Eradication of all Japanese knotweed found on site.

Further suggestions to enhance the wildlife value of the site

- Creation of a small wetland, space permitting.
- Planting of nectar providing plants around the site.
- Erection of bird and bat boxes.

Survey or information requirements: No further surveys are recommended for this site. Survey information from neighbouring sites might be useful to predict the potential value of the site for species not recorded during the present survey, especially for birds, some invertebrate groups, and mammals.

Conclusions

As Normanhurst Court supports two BAP grassland habitats, the site possibly meets local county wildlife site criteria. The BAP priority habitats present on site are only tiny fragments and mostly have a degraded form. They do not significantly add to the total resource for Sussex, but nonetheless, are valuable, with potential for enhancement and expansion. The site also provides a patchwork of open and wooded habitats which link to other sites of high wildlife value. Minor adjustments in the management of small areas could enhance this value and result in increased use of the site by local wildlife.





NORMANHURST COURT

- Short mown grassland (pitches)
- Acid grassland
- Significant tree stumps
- Woodland/copse

- III/
- AG
- X
- ♂



